

Homily. Luke 9:18-24 "Take Up Your Cross and Follow Me"
Dcn Jay Dallas, St. Teresa's, June 18, 2004

St. Luke tells us, that somewhere on the long and dusty 30 mile road that runs south from the ancient city of Caesarea Phillipi towards the Sea of Galilee, Jesus began to speak with His disciples about His coming crucifixion. And, He told them that they, too, will need to take up their own cross if they want to truly be His disciples. Now, that is pretty strong language.

The image of dragging a heavy cross, which was a symbol of torture and death at the time, offers no room for cozy and easy living as a Christian. No other line better sums up the message that Jesus wants us to "sell out" for Him - without compromise - no matter what - in order to really follow Him.

This means that Christianity preaches not only a crucified Lord - but also of crucified disciples.

Not only that, but Luke's version of the story tells us Jesus adds that we must pick up that cross "daily" = all the time. Not just on Sundays, or seasonally, or at special times in our lives. This means doing it diligently ...very seriously ... and consistently.

So, what does it mean to "pick up your cross"?

It is an invitation to a life full of both richness and risk - of holy passion and of a faith that must often outstrip reason.

It means making a sincere decision every day to live as a committed Christian, willing to deal with problems that come in the way of faith. For a few, this may mean enduring extraordinary burdens like a devastating illness or intense persecution, even to the point of martyrdom. Countless saints can testify to the great, eternal value - the spiritual maturity - that is gained from accepting God's will, even in illness and trials, with courage and patient endurance? What a great miracle they experienced as God took their suffering, snatched it from the control of evil and transformed it into a powerful prayer.

For most of us, however it is less dramatic than that. But it is still very real.

Put simply, "Taking up your cross daily" means:

Doing the right thing even when no one else will ever notice... whether it is convenient or inconvenient...and whether you are at home where everyone knows you - or out of town where they don't. In every place, Jesus says "carry your cross".

When they pass over you at work because you're not a backstabber like some others - Jesus says "carry your cross with me".

When you are young and full of hormones and you choose to treat your girlfriend or boyfriend with respect and dignity rather than enter into an unholy, sinful, physical relationship with them like everyone else is doing - Jesus says to "carry your cross".

When some of your friends ditch you because you put certain moral limits on what you'll say, or what you'll do, or where you will go - Jesus says "carry your cross".

"Carrying your cross" means being a person of daily prayer - even if it means getting up a little early or staying up a little later at night.

It means doing God's will - even when that involves changing your plans - or your job - or some of your friends.

It means being willing to be uncomfortable or to take a risk, if that's what is necessary.

It means that I don't have to be popular or part of the majority. I am satisfied to be a member of the victorious minority.

It means having humility... using modesty in conversation ... acting justly towards others ... showing mercy ... exercising self discipline ... being ready to sacrifice for the sake of love ... trying hard to live in peace ... and refusing to hurt others.

It means to love people and the many good things in life - but prefer nothing over your closeness to Christ, standing by Him and His cross with loyalty and courage.

The metaphor of "Accepting the cross" is Christ's invitation and challenge to plunge ourselves deeper into our Baptismal waters (i.e.: the graces and promises that first made us children of God). It is the adult Christian's solemn PLEDGE to now live up to those initial vows.

That pledge says that:

"I have decided (as a clear-headed act of my will not dependent on my emotions or changeable conditions in my life) to be a disciple of Jesus Christ. That die is cast. That commitment is made.

I am still imperfect, weak and sinful, it's true, but I won't let that paralyze me. I won't back away, let up, slow down, or be still any more. My past, for all its failures, has been redeemed by the Savior. Therefore, my present makes sense and my future is secure.

Even if there is some pain or difficulty along the way, I am FINISHED with low living, chained-up visions and warped goals.

I will no longer demand pre-eminence, prosperity, plaudits or popularity to be happy.

I will no longer demand to be right all the time, to be first in line, to be recognized for my achievements or rewarded for my contributions.

All these lesser goods will take the lesser priority in my affection that they rightly deserve. I know who I am in the Lord. I labor in HIS POWER. Therefore, I cannot be bought by worldly treasure, lured away by the flesh or made to flinch in the face of the sacrifice.

I will certainly hope for the best life I can - but, even if my true friends are few and worldly comforts become scarce, I will go on in the strength of the Holy Spirit until HE says that I am done. When He finally comes for me, I know He will have no trouble recognizing me - because He will know His cross which I have borne with me. "

The cross reminds us that suffering and disillusionment are not terminal. They are merely signs of impending resurrection - reminders of what lies beyond the cross in the liberating power of Christ's love.

The cross is the "signature of Jesus", indelibly marked on our hearts. We should value it above every other treasure.

When Jesus says that each disciple must deny his very self and "lose his life", He means that we should acknowledge that God knows best what will make us truly happy. Our own limited understanding is, by comparison, naive and may be self-destructive. Therefore, an intelligent person, informed by faith, will willingly and actively submit to God's will. The cross means that when my will clashes with the will of God, I drop my sword and surrender in trust to His plans, even if it hurts and disappoints me in the short run - because I want to live WELL. Therefore, I will live, not my way ...but HIS WAY.

Let us approach the altar today, receiving the Eucharist and praying for the grace that makes us dare to be different - humble enough to accept risk and faithful enough to persevere every day.

This is God's will for you and me. It is His plan for freedom and a satisfying and meaningful life. This is what it means to "take up your cross daily".